DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 673 UD 029 690

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TITLE Beyond Culture: Communicating with Asian American Children and Families. ERIC/CUE Digest Number 94.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-UD-93-8; ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE Dec 93
CONTRACT RR93002016
NOTE 6p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Box 40, New York, NY 10027 (free).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; Behavior Patterns; Beliefs; *Children; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; Ethnic Groups; Intercultural Communication; *Pacific Americans; Parent Participation; *Parents; Racial Differences; Stereotypes; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

To explore the complexities of communication with Asian and Pacific Islander (API) children and their families, this digest describes the overt and covert dimensions of the various API cultures, and discusses API's socioeconomic background and the life experiences that affect their communication behavior. The general ethnic groups in the API community are Pacific Islanders (mainly Hawaiians, Samoans, and Guamanians), Southeast Asians (mostly Indochinese from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and including Burmese and Filipinos), and East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans). It is important not to generalize an understanding of one group to another, and educators must identify differences in order to devise appropriate communication strategies. Overt culture includes belief systems and language, aspects of a culture that can be easily identified and studied. Covert culture is more subtle, and encompasses such aspects as the conception of time and communication. Suggestions are given for practitioners to enhance communication through the following: (1) personal reflection; (2) partnerships with community organizations; (3) information gathering; (4) parent involvement; (5) overcoming stereotypes of APIs; and (6) accurate evaluation of individual children. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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BEYOND CULTURE: COMMUNICATING WITH ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

ERIC Digest

Number 94, December 1993 EDO-UD-93-8

UD029690

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

Number 94, December 1993 EDO-UD-93-8 ISSN 0889 8049

BEYOND CULTURE: COMMUNICATING WITH ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Introduction

In recent decades, migration waves have brought to the United States large numbers of Asians and Pacific Islanders (API). Well over two-fifths of all nonamnesty persons admitted in the U.S. in 1991 were API (Barkan, 1992). The trend of increasing API immigration is clear: the API portion in the U.S. total immigration steadily grew from the 1972's 28.7 percent to 1985's 44.2 percent (Barkan, 1992). Consequently, API student enrollment has been increasing drastically. In 1979, 217,000 enrolled 8-15 year old APIs were identified as language minorities; by 1989, the number had reached 547,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). With their drastically different cultural backgrounds, API children's schooling poses a challenge to educators and the society.

Cross-cultural communication is a fundamental issue in education for APIs, since they have distinct communication norms that are significantly different from those of native born Americans and other immigrants. Problems in communication between education professionals and APIs, if not thoughtfully dealt with, may evolve into conflicts between APIs and the education institution. Polarized school performance, psychosocial maladjustment, and gang activity among Asians are indications of such conflicts (Trueba, Cheng, & Ima, 1993).

To explore the complexities of communication with API children and their families, this digest describes the overt and covert dimensions of the various API cultures, and discusses APIs' socioeconomic background and life experiences that affect their communication behavior. The goal is to help practitioners improve communication with APIs and, thus, more effectively educate API children.

The API Community

There are three general ethnicities within the API community: (1) Pacific Islanders, mostly Hawaiians, Samoans, and Guamanians; (2) Southeast Asians, largely comprised of Indochinese from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burmese and Philippinos; and (3) East Asians, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (Trueba, Cheng, & Ima 1993).

Not only do these three large groups differ in sociocultural traits, but subgroups within each group often differ as well (see, for example, Trueba et al., 1993; Cheng, 1989; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988).

It is important not to generalize an understanding of one group to another. For example, the Vietnamese and Hmong, though both Indochinese, differ in their basic cultural patterns. The Vietnamese, many with a Chinese ancestry, have a sophisticated literate culture and strong abilities to adapt to the market society; the Hmong have no written language, nor skills that are easily applicable to American labor needs. Educators must identify such differences to devise appropriate communication strategies for teaching and counseling APIs.

API Cultures and Communication

Psychological anthropology differentiates culture into *overt* and *covert* dimensions (Hall, 1977); both are crucial in determining communication behavior. The overt or open culture refers to clearly identifiable cultural components such as religion, formal language, and values and norms explicated in philosophy or folklore. Covert or hidden culture, on the other hand, is defined by the unconscious behavioral and perceptual patterns resulting from daily social learning.

Overt Culture

Values and norms embedded in language, religion, philosophy, custom, and social organization forms, such as family, are important variables affecting APIs' behavior.

Historically, under the influence of Chinese Confucianism, East Asians developed complex literate cultures and cohesive family organizations. The history of Southeast Asians reflects both the Chinese tradition and Indian Buddhism. Of the Pacific Islander groups, each has a history of struggle for cultural preservation against colonial oppression, and holds a unique and rich tribal cultural heritage (Treuba et al., 1993).

Belief System. Cultural contrasts are, of course, sharpest between APIs and American mainstream society. APIs think about social institutions such as school quite differently from American educators. APIs see teachers as professionals with authority over their children's schooling; they believe that parents are not supposed to interfere with school processes. Some APIs, therefore, regard teachers who seek parent involvement as incompetent (National School Public Relations Association, 1993). Educators then must explain, patiently, that parent involvement is a tradition in American education.

Sometimes, the contrast of belief systems is profound. Without knowledge about the culture of APIs, school personnel cannot resolve problems. A telling example is the school's response to the killing of five Cambodian children by a gunman in Stockton, California, in 1989 (for a detailed account, see Treuba et al., 1993). After the tragedy, the greatest fear of the Cambodian community was not of the recurrence of killing, as school personnel supposed and painstakingly tried to assuage, but the haunting spirits of the dead. In their native religion, people cannot resume normal routines until the spirits of the dead are comforted and settled down. Therefore, the Cambodians refused to send their children back to school until the school officials, as advised by a Cambodian consultant, performed a folk religious ritual to release the spiritual burden of the community.

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Even the seeming compatibility in values and beliefs between some APIs and mainstream Americans can hide serious obstacles to effective schooling and emotional well-being for Asian children. Like middle-class Americans, East Asians, particularly Chinese, highly value formal education. They often consider their children's schooling directly related to the family's integrity: high achievement brings honor and prestige to the family, failure brings shame (Shen & Mo, 1990; Lee, 1989). The intense pressure upon children to succeed often generates intergenerational conflicts and psychological difficulties for children. Many API children suffer from test anxiety, social isolation, and impaired self-esteem because of their mediocre school performance (Shen & Mo, 1990). Another source of family tension is the communication barrier between predominantly Asian language speaking parents and predominantly English speaking children (Power, 1990). Educators should, therefore, be sensitive to aspects of Asian cultures that provoke student stress and conflict and help students deal with their negative feelings.

Asians' entrenched belief that psychological distress is a manifestation of organic disorders (Kleinman & Good, 1985) significantly affects their children's psychosocial well-being. Parents have difficulty accepting concepts such as learning disabilities and depression. In their idioms, a person who, using the vocabulary of Western psychology, is "depressed" is either physically sick or simply lacking motivation. Psychological distress and psychiatric disorders are often seen as shameful to both the individual and the family (Kleinman & Good, 1985). To help parents understand their children's problems, therefore, educators have to be very thoughtful in their explanations of the reasons for their problems. They need to make it clear that psychosocial problems are not a source of shame, and, regardless of different cultural expressions of the problem, cooperation between the family and the professionals can solve them.

Language. Language differences, with obvious implications for schooling, are striking between APIs and American mainstream society. In California, Southeast Asians have the highest rate of limited English proficiency students among all API groups; the rate is even higher than that of the Hispanic population (Ima & Rumbaut, 1989). This is probably the case nationwide. A unique barrier to schooling for some Southeast Asians (rural Laotians, Hmongs, and Montagnards from Vietnam) is their lack of exposure to any writing system prior to immigration (Treuba et al., 1993). The language barrier may be compounded by other psychological or physical problems such as learning disabilities and hearing impairment. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish language differences (characteristics of learning English as influenced by the native language) from speech disorders (language difficulties resulting from mental or physical disorders). Particular attention is needed to identify hearing impairment—a disability that seems highly prevalent among Southeast Asian immigrants (Yoshinaga-Itano, 1990).

Hidden Culture

Whereas overt culture consists of established behavioral patterns that can be explicitly identified and studied, and, hence, are relatively easy to understand, covert culture is much more subtle, but regulates one's daily life unconsciously. Learning how to talk and walk, how to move one's body and make facial expressions, and most of all, how to think and feel, is so deeply ingrained in humans that they are rarely aware of these processes. Certain long-established institutions (e.g., school) and daily behaviors are taken for granted, as if there are no alternative ways to live. In fact, however, all social institutions are artificial and many behaviors are learned. Every culture has its unique, deep-rooted dimensions that become entrenched in the human brain (Hall, 1977).

Time. Unconscious culture also involves the conception of time. Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders have a polychronic time (P-time) framework, in contrast to Western monochronic time (Hall, 1977). P-time allows different social interactions to happen at the same time. M-time demands a linear scheduling of events. Teachers may be irritated when API parents come late for an appointment without an apology, or offended when APIs are inattentive to what they have to say. Because Asians perceive time as a simultaneous process, they are not aware of the linear scheduling of teachers' time. Similarly, some APIs, such as the Hmong, believe time per se can solve problems better than human intervention. They reason that one should not push hard in haste, but, rather, let events run their own course (Treuba et al., 1993). An understanding of such a different notion of time may help teachers facilitate interaction among parents and staff.

Communication. Another covert cultural dimension is described as high-context versus low-context communication (Hall, 1977). High-context communication does not require clear, explicit verbal articulation. It relies on presumptions shared by people, non-verbal signals (e.g., body movement), and the very situation in which the interaction occurs. Low-context communication, on the other hand, involves intensively elaborate expressions that do not need much situational interpretation. While it is doubtful that the communication norms of any society, or even individual, are totally high- or low-context, API cultures are more high-contextual, and Anglo American society is more low-contextual.

Like other low-context cultures (Hall, 1977), APIs, particularly East Asian Americans, are typically polite and even submissive in social encounters, but when a dispute persists, they may suddenly become very hostile without providing warning signals. This happens because of the unconscious cultural conflict between low-context and high-context cultures. APIs, used to their high-context communication and, thus, constantly "tuned" to the moods of the other conversants during interaction, expect the others to be similarly sensitive. Westerners, who only pay attention to what is explicitly said, however, often ignore nonverbal cues. In an attempt to reach closure, and hearing no verbal disagreement and not noticing the nonverbal Asians' hesitancy, American professionals may move quickly toward resolution of the matter at hand. Then, when the Asian Americans finally explode in anger because they can no longer tolerate the conflict and are upset that their nonverbal messages were not received, the Westerners are surprised.

In conversations, Asians unconsciously favor verbal hesitancy and ambiguity to avoid giving offense (Kim, 1985), and they refrain from making spontaneous or critical remarks. Their body language is characterized by repeated head-nodding and lack of eye contact (Matsuda, 1989). The Japanese are notoriously unwilling to use the word "no" even when they actually disagree with others (Wierzbicka, 1991). This is also generally the case for other Asian groups, such as the Vietnamese (Coker, 1988). When Asians try to

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translate their norm of sending indirect messages during a discussion into English, a language they have difficulty mastering, their efforts are often misunderstood or ignored.

Misinterpretation of APIs' verbal and nonverbal expressions occurs because neither APIs nor teachers are aware of the mismatched hidden dimension in communication. Too often, a discussion proceeds as if everyone is in accord until finally the API is asked—and refuses—to demonstrate approval by signing an agreement (Matsuda, 1989). APIs expect teachers to understand their concerns, confusion, and hesitance, whereas teachers take APIs' head-nodding, smiles, and verbal assent as clear indication of consent. Particularly enigmatic to teachers is some APIs' smiles (Coker, 1988), which express confusion and embarrassment far more often than pleasure. When dealing with API children in particular, it is important to observe them patiently and carefully, and to take into account the specific situation in which the interaction takes place, in order to understand the meaning of their smiles (Coker, 1988).

API Background and Life Experience

Socioeconomic status and immigration history, often related to cultural differences, jointly affect APIs' communication and schooling. Moreover, APIs' socioeconomic background is as complex as their cultural background. Immigrants from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are more likely to have a middle-class background. Southeast Asian refugees, on the other hand, were mostly rural villagers or the urban poor before they migrated, although APIs from the same region may differ in socioeconomic background. A middle-class family background often fosters intellectual flexibility and self-direction. APIs with such a background have less difficulty interacting with teachers. In contrast, fatalist beliefs and rigidity in thinking are more common among poor APIs and those with rural origins. These APIs face tough problems in communicating with school personnel. The joint effect of cultural differences and social background may polarize APIs' school performance, with some excelling, others failing (Treuba et al., 1993).

In addition, Asian Americans born in the U.S. differ from Asian immigrants in their communication with mainstream educators (National School Public Relations Association, 1993), with the latter having more problems. Among immigrants, those who had traumatic experiences in war or refugee camps have more difficulties in communication (Ima & Rumbaut, 1989). Such life experiences can profoundly influence children's reaction to the new environment.

Suggestions for Practitioners

Personal Reflection

To understand other cultures, it is necessary to "transcend the limits of individual cultures" (Hall, 1977, p.2). To communicate effectively with API children educators have to analyze their own cultural unconscious to bring out the unseen differences; they should critically examine their own values, beliefs, learning styles, and communication behavior (Cheng, 1989). By examining the peculiarities of their own behavior, educators can better appreciate that any foreign or "exotic" communication patterns, just like their own, are learned, reasonable ways of interacting.

Partnerships with Community Organizations in the U.S.

Grassroots organizations of APIs provide strong support to families and children. For instance, in Southern California, Asian Americans have extensive networks through churches and ethnic organizations (Treuba et al., 1993). School personnel should take advantage of these community organizations to access and help facilitate communication with families and parents.

General Communication

Care is the key to understanding. Immigrants who utter flat imperatives often are seen as rude or dumb by native English speakers; in fact, APIs simply do not command the elaborate indirectness of English (Wierzbicka, 1991). Only through careful interaction with children and their families, and close collaboration among teachers, special educators, and health professionals, will it be possible to accurately identify problems and work together to solve them.

The following suggestions for education professionals, drawn from a set of guidelines for speech pathologists (Matsuda, 1989,) may help avoid a communication breakdown with APIs:

- Establish the professional's role and assume authority.
- Reach consensus by compromising.
- Address immediate needs and give concrete advice.
- Respect API cultural beliefs and incorporate them into teaching.
- Be patient, and consider periods of silence opportunities for reflection on what has been said.
- Provide clear and full information, such as what will be provided by, and is expected from, each participant in the discussion.
- Be attentive to nonverbal cues.

Information Gathering

Comprehensive information about students' backgrounds is indispensable, including native language, cultural environment, educational history, school experience, health conditions, and family and other social support systems (Cheng, 1989). Because of many APIs' experience with authoritarian systems and a tendency to avoid self-disclosure, they are wary of officials and may withhold information from school personnel. Care and patience are, again, necessary for obtaining information.

Tips for communicating with APIs include individual rather than group meetings, oral communication rather than written memos, and "phone trees" among parents themselves (National School Public Relations Association, 1993).

Parent Involvement

For many API groups the family has a dual function: social support and social control (Treuba et al., 1993). Among immigrant families, however, these functions sometimes conflict and create tensions. Tradition demands that the young obey the elderly, but in daily life, English literate teenaged APIs often serve crucial roles such as the English interpreter and participants in family decision-making. Both children and parents have to struggle with this role conflict. Thus, parent involvement in children's schooling should be cultivated in a way that not only enhances schooling, but also reduces tension in the family.

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One way to bring parents into the school, to help them understand how teaching and learning takes place in the U.S., and to bridge the generation gaps within families, is to offer a family literacy project that helps parents and children alike become proficient in the English language. An increasing number of Federal and state programs are funding family literacy projects, and the California Department of Education is hosting a conference where project coordinators can share information in early 1994 ("Family Literacy," 1993).

Overcoming Stereotypes of APIs

Most API students are not academically gifted. The "wiz kids" stereotype, often applied to East Asian children, may put unnecessary pressure on students, resulting in emotional distress and school failure (Shen & Mo, 1990). The stereotype of docile API children may also hurt them. Some teachers do feel uncomfortable when they meet assertive Asian students, because their "out of character" manner contradicts the stereotype. Teachers should work to transcend such stereotypes and treat each student on individual basis.

Accurate Evaluation of Children

As discussed earlier, API children may be misdiagnosed as having behavioral or physical disorders because of their communication difficulties. Conversely, precisely because of communication difficulties, APIs' behavioral and health problems may be concealed from teachers. Here, language differences, cultural knowledge, learning or behavioral disorders, and physical health problems may be related to one another. To disentangle the individual problems that often have underlying connections, educators need in-depth cultural understanding, meticulous information gathering, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

— **Gary Huang**

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This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002016. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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